



Celis, K., Childs, S. L., & Curtin, J. (2016). Specialised Parliamentary Bodies and the Quality of Women's Substantive Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Belgium, United Kingdom and New Zealand. *Parliamentary affairs*, 69(4), 812-829.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsw007>

Peer reviewed version

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# **Specialized Parliamentary Bodies and the Quality of Women's Substantive Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Belgium, United Kingdom and New Zealand**

## **Abstract**

This comparative analysis investigates formal parliamentary bodies 'for women' and more informal networks and parliamentary groups ('gender equality bodies'). These are evaluated to determine the extent to which they contribute to a 'good' collective process of women's substantive representation. Using interview data, official parliamentary documents, and relevant bodies and groups' websites in three countries (Belgium, United Kingdom and New Zealand), we explore which venues are responsive to women in society and which are inclusive of a wide variety of claims. Overall, the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ) cases score better than Belgium on the responsiveness criterion given that linkage with the women's movement is more or less guaranteed. When we turn to the criterion of inclusiveness of a variety of views and interests, the Belgian and UK systems appear more promising than the NZ case, predominantly because of their rules concerning the composition of the gender equality bodies. Nevertheless, in none of the three countries do the various bodies constitute a strong site for quality substantive representation of women (SRW). Rather, in the end SRW remains dependent on the role of critical actors.

**Keywords:** substantive representation, women in parliament, parliamentary committees, United Kingdom, Belgium, New Zealand

Analysis of women's substantive representation has been central to gender and politics research over more than a decade as scholars have investigated the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation (Bolzendahl 2014; Celis et al 2008; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Lovenduski and Gaudagnini 2010; Dovi 2007, 2010). The traditional answer to questions relating of the 'who, how and what' of women's substantive representation has been women representatives, if not feminist representatives, acting in national legislatures, executives and women's policy agencies acting in a feminist direction. Unsurprisingly then, a plethora of global empirical research has documented the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation (see Childs and Lovenduski 2013 for an overview).

Conceiving of substantive representation in this traditional way has nonetheless proven somewhat problematic at both the theoretical and empirical level. First, a focus on female representatives rules out the actions of male representatives, revealing an essentialism that is troubling (Childs and Krook 2006). Secondly, adopting a feminist definition of women's interests also excludes the claims 'for women' that fall outside these terms or are articulated by those who are not considered feminist (Celis and Childs 2012; Celis 2012; Childs and Krook 2009; Curtin 2014). Thirdly, a focus on formal elected institutions ignores alternative sites and representatives, including formal institutions to which women are selected rather than elected (Celis and Childs 2012; Celis et al 2008; Curtin 2008; Curtin 2014a). Added to these, questions of accountability and responsiveness – of the quality of the representative relationship between the represented and the representative – have frequently been marginalized (Severs 2012).

It is the issue of the *quality* of the substantive representation of women that is addressed here. The quality of the substantive representation of women refers to the extent it

is representative of women's issues and interests and the degree to which it establishes a strong representative relationship between the representatives and the represented (Celis and Childs 2015). Elsewhere we have argued that gender and politics scholars can gain conceptual insight from Saward's (2010) concept of an economy of claims, where this referring to the totality of claims and counter claims that are made by a wide variety of actors. Accordingly, the quality of a gendered economy of claims looks to the myriad of representative claims made by actors on behalf of women. We suggest 'good' substantive representation can be measured by three criteria. The first assesses the claims voiced by women's representatives (including (women) MPs, political parties, civil society organisations, experts, state agencies, celebrities, following Saward 2010), and judges these in terms of their representative relationship with women, i.e. the extent to which they are *responsive* to women in society. The key question here is whether the representative claims made on behalf of women reflect their actual issues and needs. The second criterion addresses the *inclusiveness* of the claims made for women, and is particularly interested in representative claims which are *excluded*. The economy of gendered claims should be inclusive of, and responsive to, women in their diversity, and not only a specific sub-group of (likely majority) women and their interests. Hence we are looking for Dodson's 'cacophony of representative claims' (Dodson, 2006). The third criterion points to the relative 'status' of representatives' claims. Here we mean the voices of those represented should not only be included, but should also receive *equal* respect and consideration, and be able to generate an effect (Severs 2012).

But what might such a responsive, inclusive and egalitarian process of substantive representation look like 'on the ground'? How can the quality criteria just introduced be operationalized in a specific context, how might they contribute to measuring the quality of women's substantive representation? In this article we approach this operationalization in an

inductive fashion while studying ‘women’s parliamentary spaces’. These are, by design, established to address women’s issues/interests within the parliament, which is the most immediate site for political debate, deliberation and contestation by parliamentarians from a range of political parties. However, while specific actors may be important to specific claims at any one point in time, our interest lies in the extent to which women’s spaces might further a ‘good’ substantive representation process. Here we limit ourselves to two of our three criteria: *responsiveness* and *inclusion*. We do this because these two criteria necessarily precede, and are required in order for egalitarianism.

We offer an analysis of three parliaments of Belgium<sup>1</sup>, the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ), through which to examine these two criteria. Ours is not a most similar nor most different design, as the objective is not to generalise about best practice nor test specific theoretical claims. Rather, through our selection of diverse parliamentary system, we aim to identify the institutional design features of a range of women’s parliamentary bodies that might lead to good substantive representation in three advanced democracies with similar socio-economic characteristics. Our sources are drawn from official parliamentary documents and records; the institution’s website; email correspondence/interviews with institutions’ chairs or administrators; and relevant news/internet searches. Limitations of published material restrict the coverage of our analysis at this stage to the institutional foundations and formal rules establishing the gender equality bodies under scrutiny. This precludes us, in this paper, from evaluating how the women/gender equality bodies function in specific political contexts such as when particular parties are in government.

The following three sections discuss the Belgian, UK and New Zealand cases in turn. For each we first give some general information concerning the parliamentary setting

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of comparability only national parliaments are researched.

and provide information about the women's/gender parliamentary bodies before evaluating the institutional set-up of these bodies using our criteria outlined above. Drawing from a range of primary and secondary materials, we offer an exploratory consideration of the bodies' representational activities and relationships and we conclude with an assessment of which 'institutional' spaces might be considered preferable in progressing quality substantive representation of women.

### **The Belgian case<sup>2</sup>**

Belgium has a bicameral Parliament at the national level consisting of a Chamber of Representatives (the lower house) and the Senate (the upper house). Like all other parliaments in Belgium, the Chamber is organized via parliamentary party groups (PPGs) and parliamentary committees; both are formally institutionalised and receive logistical support (secretariat, offices etc). The committees group MPs according to policy domains (for instance, employment, justice, the military), and are linked to the ministerial portfolios. All committees are proportionally composed by strength of PPG and membership of a committee usually reflects the expertise of MPs, and/or their career goals, as well as the preferences of the MPs and their party (Devos 2006; Deschouwer & Hooghe 2005).

These committees are the key bodies in the parliamentary decision-making process. They meet for two full days each week. Their meetings are open to the public and their agenda is announced on the website in advance. Core parliamentary law-making and control

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<sup>2</sup> Sources: Annual Reports of the Chamber, 2010-2012 [http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf\\_sections/publications/annualreport/Activiteiten%20bijzondere%20commissies.pdf](http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/annualreport/Activiteiten%20bijzondere%20commissies.pdf) consulted on 2 April 2015; Annual Reports of the Chamber 2012-2013 [http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf\\_sections/publications/annualreport/Activiteiten%20BIJZONDERE%20comm\\_2012-2013.pdf](http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/annualreport/Activiteiten%20BIJZONDERE%20comm_2012-2013.pdf) consulted on 2 April 2015; Annual reports of the Senate consulted 2010-2011; 2011-2012; 2012-2013; 2013-2014 on 2/04/2015 [http://senate.be/www/?Mival=/index\\_senate&MENUID=14170&LANG=nl](http://senate.be/www/?Mival=/index_senate&MENUID=14170&LANG=nl); Telephone interview with Karin Huybens, Advisor of the Service for Committees of the Chamber of Representatives on 1 April 2015; with Carine Lalieu, chair of the advisory committee 2013-2014 on 1 April 2015; with Sabine de Bethune, chair of the Senate, on 27 March 2015.

activities take place in these committee meetings. They discuss, amend and vote on legislation, interrogate ministers, and can organise hearings with experts and civil society organisations. It is only after a consensus is reached in the committee that the plenary parliamentary meeting deliberates and ultimately votes.

In the Chamber there are five types of committees: fixed, advisory, temporary, extraordinary and inquiry committees. The fixed committees are the most important and reflect key ministerial portfolios of which there are eleven. Advisory committees, like fixed committees, are established for the entire legislature but deal with policy issues crosscutting multiple policy domains that are not per se linked to a specific ministerial portfolio. However, in contrast to fixed committees, advisory committees are only able to offer advice, and hence wield less power. Alongside these, the other three committee types may be constituted to investigate a specific law, deal with specific tasks or investigate in a quasi-judicial fashion a societal problem. Committees can also meet jointly with other committees of the Chamber or the Senate.<sup>3</sup>

It is at the committee level where we find formal ‘representation’ of gender-related issues. In the Chamber, there exists the Advisory Committee on Societal Emancipation and in the Senate (until 2014) it was the Advisory Committee on Equality for Women and Men, while one of the two ‘transversal’ committees also has a mandate to consider issues related to gender equality.<sup>4</sup> These advisory committees – hereafter the women/gender committees – function, and are composed, in the same manner as all other committees (i.e. proportionally to the strength of governing as well as oppositional PPGs), with the exception that the Chamber’s regulations posit that each party faction with women MPs should ensure at least

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<sup>3</sup> Since 2014, Senate committees are no longer organized according to policy themes and there are only three fixed Senate committees: (i) constitutional affairs, (ii) the Communities ‘transversal’ committee (dealing with issues related to the competencies of the communities (i.e. personal matters, like culture and education), and (iii) the Regions ‘transversal’ committee (dealing with regional affairs). Only the first transversal committee discusses gender equality related themes..

one woman holds a seat on the women/gender committee (article 69). Members of the women/gender committees usually join voluntarily in order to represent women and women's interests (Celis and Wauters 2011: 388; Celis and Woodward 2003), so it is not surprising that these committees tend to have an overrepresentation of women MPs. Nevertheless, some women - even feminists - refrain from becoming members out of fear for marginalisation; of not being considered 'mainstream' politicians (Celis and Wauters 2011).

In terms of activities, between 2010 and 2014 the women/gender committee in the Chamber has investigated, amongst other matters, the gender wage gap, political participation while on maternity leave, and the UN status of women reports. Over the same period the Senate and transversal committees examined the rights of women in Afghanistan, the representation of women on company boards, in public institutions and the constitutional court, gendering national indicators and social statistics, women and peacekeeping (UN Resolution 1325), female genital mutilation, and the UN Platform post-Beijing (this is not a comprehensive list).

However, it is not solely the activities of the committees that we are interested in here; rather it is the process by which representation and discussion around these issues takes place. What we see is that in terms of *responsiveness*, the fact that committee meetings, including the women/gender committee and the transversal committees in the post 2014 Senate, are open to the public potentially increases responsiveness. In theory, women's movement actors and other interested women, can find out about the agenda of the committees and attend, and this would count as a positive indicator of responsiveness. In practice, however, interviewees noted it is rather exceptional for non-MPs to attend committee meetings.



Responsiveness is also increased by the rather high accessibility of the women/gender committees for MPs with strong ties to the (political) women's movement. In other words, MPs well-versed in women's perspectives on women's issues are able to act effectively and responsively if they so wish by becoming a member of the gender equality committee. Furthermore, even in cases where MPs lack such ties and hence lack the ability to tap into these resources, there is always the parliamentary party group (PPG) where committee issues are discussed in advance. As such, feminists in the PPG who are not a member of the gender equality committee or the women's sections of the party can inform the representative(s) of the PPG regarding issues that are discussed in the women/gender committee. Even so, responsiveness may be limited by women/feminist MPs hesitancy to become a member of the women/gender committee.

In terms of inclusiveness, the most significant feature of the Belgian gender equality committees seems to be its right to organise hearings on their own initiative. In the period studied (2010 – 2015) the women/gender committee in the Chamber (which has proportional party membership) organized two such hearings with external actors and the Senate organized eleven. External actors invited to the hearings included: representatives of feminist and non-feminist women's organisations and other civil society organisations; public officers from departments working on the policies concerned, including gender equality policy; and academic and other experts. Committees also have the right to ask for external advice and to decide to have joint meetings. Our interviewees stressed that representativeness of the participants of the hearings is a central concern although it is not formalized as a standing rule. More precisely, a balance is sought by the chair of the gender equality body in terms of ideology/religion (for instance when trade unions or university experts are invited) and language (participants from the Flemish and Francophone parts of Belgium). When the committee decides to organize a hearing the parliamentary parties are

asked to suggest participants that should be heard, even if the committee (or in some cases the chair) decides whom to actually invite. The invited institutions or individuals are asked to prepare a note for the hearing, present their views during the meeting and answer the questions of the committee members. In some exceptional cases only written advice is included in the hearing. After hearings, committees produce a report that is subsequently included in the parliamentary decision-making process. In the case of the joint committee in the new Senate, its reports are delivered to the Ministers in charge of gender equality of the respective national and sub-state governments and parliaments.

Such hearings, but also the expert consultations and joint meetings, have then the potential to actively seek out and include voices that otherwise are not easily heard. Nevertheless, seeking such representativeness is in no way a formal requirement. In practice, a plurality of voices is included, including oppositional ones. But analysis of hearing participants indicates that it is mostly institutions and strongly organised civil society organisations that are included.<sup>5</sup> Including marginalized voices does not seem to be a priority of the gender equality bodies.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the women/gender committees are not fixed committees; rather, their status as advisory committees reduces their capacity for influence on the broader policy and political agenda of respective governments.

### **The case of the United Kingdom**

The UK parliament is a bi-cameral institution, in which the lower house, the House of Commons takes primacy. Elected by a ‘first past the post’ electoral system the House of Commons normally returns single party government, although 2010-2015 saw a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. Adversarialism is a key feature of the UK system,

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 2 for references

<sup>6</sup> It is the Committee Chair who will make decisions, in consultation with Committee Members, as to who takes part. Whether this is impacted by party membership has not been evaluated here.

as it is of Westminster systems- most divisions over legislation are decided along party lines.

A system of departmental select committees in their modern form was introduced in 1979; as the name implies, these mirror for the most part departments of government.<sup>7</sup> A Minister for Women at the Cabinet level was introduced following the general election of 1997, under new Labour, although the post was notably something less than the Ministry of Women once advocated by women in the party, and was always a role shared with another departmental responsibility (Childs 2004; Annesley and Gains 200?). There was no equivalent departmental select committee until summer when a Women and Equalities Committee was belatedly established. Neither has the Commons had an institution-wide formal women's caucus; cross party collaboration amongst women MPs were limited to informal and usually time specific mobilizations, for example, in defence of abortion legislation (Childs 2008).<sup>8</sup> In part this reflected the asymmetry of women's political representation amongst women MPs: in the recent past Labour women MPs have significantly outnumbered other women MPs, with the Conservative party only significantly increasing its number, and still to below 20 percent in 2010 (Childs and Webb 2012). It was also the case that inter-party competition over women's political recruitment, and in particular Labour advocacy for and Conservative party rejection of quotas, prevented much collaboration on the issue of descriptive representation. Instead, in the period under examination there were two types of women's parliamentary bodies in the UK parliament. First, are the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGS), of which are number are explicitly concerned with women and women's equality and issues. Nevertheless these should not be considered a caucus, in that whilst they are parliament wide, they are officially informal in

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select/>

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this in the aftermath of the 2015 general election see [www.policybristol.blogs.bris.ac.uk](http://www.policybristol.blogs.bris.ac.uk) and also <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/>

nature.<sup>9</sup> The second type of women's parliamentary body is found within the parties namely, the Parliamentary Labour Party's Women's Committee (WPLP) which is longstanding since the 1980s and relatively institutionalized, and the Parliamentary Conservative Women's Forum (CWF) which was first established in the 2005 Parliament and. Here the focus is on the APPGs (see Allen and Childs 2013; Allen and Childs 2015).<sup>10</sup>

APPGs are 'informal, cross-party, interest groups that have no official status within Parliament and are not accorded any powers or funding by it'.<sup>11</sup> There are two main types – country ones, which aim to 'foster links with other countries and parliaments', and subject groups, which 'address a particular issue'. A third category much fewer in number, exist 'mainly for social reasons'. The Register of All-Party Groups, established in 1985, lists those APPGs recognised by Parliament, identifies their officers, and provides information about the source and extent of financial and material assistance received from outside Parliament. Only registered cross-party groups are recognised by Parliament. They may advertise their meetings on the All-Party Notices circulated by the Whips. APPGS take priority over unregistered cross-party groups when booking rooms in the Palace of Westminster. They may also use the crowned portcullis on their official stationery, reports and websites.<sup>12</sup>

Membership is open to all Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords;<sup>13</sup> anyone else may only join at the discretion of the group. In the period of analysis, membership had to include at least 20 Members (each of whom must be a Member of the House of Commons or House of Lords), comprising: at least 10 Members who are from the

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<sup>9</sup> All party groups are referred to as APGs and APPGs – here APPGs are used, as this reflects dominant usage.

<sup>10</sup> Later research might well incorporate the workings of the new Women and Equality Committee and subject it to the same kind of analysis.

<sup>11</sup> *Groups* <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/register/register.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Country Groups may be able to affiliate with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and IPU.

<sup>13</sup> Groups where membership includes persons other than Members of both Houses, use the words 'Associate Parliamentary group'.

same political party as the government, and at least 10 who are not from the government party (of whom at least 6 must be from the main opposition party), and includes at least one officer who is a Member of the House of Commons. A meeting was quorum with three members, one of whom is an officer of the group.

According to the House of Commons (2013) Committee on Standards, Sixth Report of Session 2013–14, APPGs provide: a forum for cross-party interaction, which is not controlled by the whips; interaction between Commons and Lords Members; a forum for parliamentarians, academics, business people, the third sector and other interested parties; time and space for policy discussion and debate; and a means for back bench parliamentarians to set the policy agenda. This report noted a consensus regarding the importance *of outside interests being able to access to Members* and the sharing of expertise (Committee on Standards, 2013, 8, emphasis added).

Of the nearly 500 Subject APPGs in the UK parliament, two address equalities (1) Equalities, and (2) Sexual Equality, whilst six have women in their title: United Nations Women; Women and Enterprise; Women in Parliament; Women in the Penal System; Women, Peace and Security; Women's Sport and Fitness.<sup>14</sup> Here, we focus in most depth on the Equalities and Sexual Equality APPGs. An initial survey of the six other APPGs with 'women' in their titles their visibility is not high. Whilst the Parliament pages have links to the individual groups' pages, unless a secretariat is provided by an outside body, there is no additional website.<sup>15</sup> And even when the secretariat organization has webpages these are not necessarily easily found.<sup>16</sup> In the 2005-10 Parliament members a new APPG was

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<sup>14</sup> Another dozen or so subject groups are highly associated with women, for example: women's health and abortion; violence against women; and women's caring and maternal roles:

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/apg/>.

<sup>16</sup> For more detail on the membership and features of these six groups see K. Celis, S. Childs and J. Curtin, 'Women/Gender Parliamentary Bodies and the Quality of Women's Substantive Representation: A comparative analysis of UK, Belgium and New Zealand, Paper presented at the European Conference on Politics and Gender, University of Uppsala, 11-14 June, 2015

established, the Women in Parliament APPG. This group, whilst officially cross party as the rules of APPGs required, was in practice much less so. Labour Party membership came mostly from the Lords, and indeed the then Leader of the Women's Parliamentary Labour Party rejected the overtures of its Chair to become fully involved. Thus, whilst this group had - and indeed has - the potential to become effectively the UK Parliament's women's caucus, Labour party reluctance is such that at present it remains a much more partial and ultimately contested institution. Indeed, whilst some of its members might have claimed to 'speak for women' in the UK House of Commons, the APPG ultimately lacks the legitimacy of a caucus of all women.<sup>17</sup> It also suffers, like any other APPG, from limitations inherent in the status of APPGs. Most importantly, APPGs are 'partial' groups and without formal Parliamentary status.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of the Equalities APPG is 'to address discrimination based on all equality grounds and seek to advance equal opportunities for all'.<sup>19</sup> It receives secretariat support and benefits from the Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF).<sup>20</sup> The Sex Equality APPG's purpose is 'to campaign for the advancement of sex equality in the UK'.<sup>21</sup> It receives benefits and secretariat support from two organizations: Platform 51 and The Fawcett Society.<sup>22</sup> The two equality related APPGs suggest quite distinct foci. The Equalities APPG was very much focused on international and national legal equalities conventions and formal equalities duties in respect of a range of characteristics including sex and gender, whereas the APPG on Sexual Equalities undertook consideration of the

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<sup>17</sup> Private information.

<sup>18</sup> According to the IPU a women's caucus can be defined as 'mechanisms that have been created within the parliaments of many countries to strengthen cooperation among women engaged in political life. Such caucuses can bring women parliamentarians together across party lines in effective alliances around a common goal'. As noted in the text, the APPG has the potential but has not yet realized this status. One test of this would be for the women's PLP to officially engage with the APPG.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.edf.org.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.edf.org.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/register/sex-equality.htm>;  
<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/westminster/party-parliamentary-group-sex-equality/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>; <http://www.youngwomenstrust.org/>

condition and opportunities for women in respect of politics and power, education, employment and financial positions. Both APPGs hold meetings with the Minister for Women. The Sexual Equality APPG addressed a range of issues from women's political representation, women and financial power; education and social mobility; and employment. The Equalities APPG discussed: ICESR, the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Health, education, housing, food, and social security); the Public Sector Equality Duty;<sup>23</sup> and held a joint meeting with APPG ageing, disability, race and community.

Responsiveness to women in civil society is less clear on the basis of the APPGs analyzed here, which is what we would want to see in terms of our criteria of analysis. However, where an APPG is supported in its secretariat, the civil society groups providing that secretariat support experience – or gain – direct and ongoing access to Parliament. In concrete terms, this means that key personnel from those bodies are able to speak at APPG events, which in turn suggests their input into the APPGs' agenda. Unfortunately, on the basis of published data, it is unclear the extent to which other groups can participate in, or feed into APPG activities. The lack of a requirement to publish external speakers, one of the Committee on Standards' recommendations, limits analysis in this respect. There is, then, significant potential for APPGs to be more outward facing but the failure to require APPGs to have a website and to report on meetings, speakers, minutes, reports represents a failure to see APPGs as a means to connect with civil society groups and the wider public. Although some do this – the APPG on Women in the Penal System is the best example – overall there is an unevenness which suggests a limitation of institutionalization.

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<sup>23</sup> This requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities.' <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/review-of-public-sector-equality-duty-steering-group>

Nevertheless, formal House membership rules are inclusionary; all members of the UK Parliament – i.e. both Houses – male and female and from any political party and non party members (in the House of Lords) are able to join. As the name implies the groups must be ‘all party’. Such rules should ensure that partisan views regarding what is in the interests of women are accordingly included. In this way the substantive representation of women should be maximized as a diversity of views as carried by attending MPs and Peers are in principle included. Membership costs for MPs and Peers are minimal and unlikely to be exclusionary. Outside membership is possible, in principle extending APPGs inclusiveness, albeit at the discretion of individual groups. However, the two equalities APPGs do not appear to have members from behind on the two Houses of Parliament, as was permitted; nor was it possible to determine this for the other six ‘women’s APPGs’.

The small number of qualifying members – at the time 20 out of 650 in the Commons and the more than 800 in the House of Lords, and indeed the low quorum, means that in practice APPGs could turn out to be ‘more or less’ one, or two party, with negative consequences for the quality of women’s substantive representation. It is worth noting that the APPG Women in Parliament Group initially struggled to find willing Labour party women MPs to join.<sup>24</sup> As already mentioned, the Chair of the Women’s PLP, Fiona McTaggart, was clear that her – and by implication Labour women MPs’ - priorities lay with Labour politics and the political recruitment of Labour women MPs<sup>25</sup> Ultimately the qualifying membership of this group was telling: only two Labour women MPs were included; two Labour men and Labour peers made up the necessary six.

That APPGs are ‘all party’ in design should in principle should limit party adversarialism and engender cross-party deliberation. But, again ‘on the ground’ one-party

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<sup>24</sup> <http://labour-uncut.co.uk/tag/appg-women-in-parliament/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://labour-uncut.co.uk/tag/appg-women-in-parliament/>



might dominate. We have also found that there is significant overlapping memberships across numerous ‘women’s’ APPGs. Of the two Equalities and six Women’s APPGs considered here, which offers the total of 160 different members, we find, that: one Member is a qualifying member of six groups; one Member is qualifying member of four groups; three members are qualifying members of three groups; and ten Members are qualifying members of two groups. Now, this feature can be read in two ways: first, that a core of gender equality activists is extensively involved in a variety of APPGs, and thereby powerful players on this issue within Parliament, likely enhancing substantive representation. The second, more negative reading is that this group of MPs constitutes a ‘closed’ group, who claim ‘ownership’ of gender equality.

### **The New Zealand case**

New Zealand, as a British settler state, inherited a Westminster parliamentary system, although there are now significant differences between the UK and New Zealand. From its first formation until 1996, the House of Representatives was constituted using a ‘first past the post’ electoral system. However, from 1996 onwards New Zealand elections have operated under a multi-member proportional (MMP) electoral system, adapted from the German model, which has led to an increase in the number of political parties in parliament. Nevertheless, New Zealand’s two largest parties continue to form minority governments, dominate the policy agenda, and party discipline remains strong (Curtin and Miller 2010).

New Zealand’s parliamentary committee system has a long history, although with the shift from a plurality to MMP some additional modifications resulted. Currently, the standing select committees are usually organised around areas of government activity, determined by ministerial portfolio (there are currently 13 of these), with five specialised

standing committees that deal with the regulations and the operation of parliament.<sup>26</sup> The New Zealand parliament has no dedicated women's or equality standing committees, and parliamentary party women's caucuses tend to be fluid; in part dependent on the number and activism of women MPs within the respective parties. For the most part, it is the Labour Party who have tended to champion women's representation, descriptively and substantively. However, this has not included establishing a standing committee for women.<sup>27</sup> At present, the parliamentary Labour Women's Caucus currently meets about once per month, while National (centre right) Party women have worked less consistently as a group over time (Gustafson, 1986).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, like most Westminster parliaments with the heritage of an entrenched two party system, party discipline is strict and enforced. Parliamentary norms, such as conscience votes have allowed women to collaborate cross-party on some legislation, but this is rare rather than the norm.<sup>29</sup>

With the introduction of proportional representation, parliamentary committees have shown a greater appetite for pursuing inquiries, partly because the government has seldom had the numbers on a select committee to prevent it exercising any kind of veto.<sup>30</sup> However, to date this institutional avenue has seldom been pursued as a means to inquire into issues concerning gender equality. Over the past seven years, during the terms of both

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<sup>26</sup> The portfolio of Women's Affairs is one of 13 areas that sits inside the Government Administration Committee. This committee has included the scrutiny of two bills of substantive interest to women over the past 10 years: a bill to extend paid parental leave and employment protection (2012) and the Marriage Definition Bill (2013). Both of these were non-government bills (members' bills). The committee also considers the annual budget estimates for the Ministry for Women. [http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/pb/sc/details/government-administration/00DBHOH\\_BBSC\\_SCGA\\_1/business-before-the-government-administration-committee](http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/pb/sc/details/government-administration/00DBHOH_BBSC_SCGA_1/business-before-the-government-administration-committee)

<sup>27</sup> However, a standalone Ministry of Women's Affairs was established by the Labour Government in 1984, and still exists, albeit with a less explicitly feminist focus.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with former National Party MP, April 2015.

<sup>29</sup> For example, pornography reform and removal of section 59 of the Crimes Act.

<sup>30</sup> Normally a committee has between six and twelve members each Parties are represented in proportion to their seats in the house. Members of committees elect the chair and the chair then appoints a deputy. (Effective select committee membership. A guide for members of parliament, pp. 7-12. Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, 2014. [www.parliament.nz](http://www.parliament.nz)

Labour and National-led governments there have been approximately 40 such inquiries, only one of which has investigated an issue identifiable as directly related to women's wellbeing.<sup>31</sup> The selection of inquiry topics is dependent upon how important and politically significant the committee members consider the topic to be.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in part the substantive representation of women through committee inquiries may be dependent on the presence of (feminist) women on such committees, although a systematic gender analysis of New Zealand's parliamentary committee composition and business has yet to be undertaken. Whether the recommendations made by such committees are taken up is dependent on the government of the day, but where sufficient public input and pressure for change has accompanied the inquiry there appears to have been some success in policy reform (Palmer et al 2004: 170-172).

In addition to these formal committees, there are a range of informal cross-party groups which tend to be 'issue' based. These groups are voluntary, and may or may not be supported by a parliament-based secretariat (there are currently eight such groups). Usually the chair is a member of the government and the co-chair or deputy chair is from an opposition party. Chairs are elected by the members of the group, membership is voluntary and the size of these groups fluctuates over time. Two of these —the New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development, (NZPPD), and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (NZCWP) have a recent history of addressing gender equality issues.

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<sup>31</sup> This was the Inquiry into the Funding of Specialist Sexual Violence Social Services, chaired by the Social Services Committee in 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Inquiries are generally initiated by committees themselves but can also be referred from the House. Decisions on matters relating to inquiries and other business are usually made by consensus, although may be put to a vote if there is disagreement.

The NZPPD is a voluntary cross-party group of parliamentarians who share an interest in increasing awareness of and a desire to prioritize sexual and reproductive health and rights issues in the Pacific region. Established in 1998 to further the achievement of the Programme of Action developed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) NZPPD regularly engages with counterparts, in particular from the Asia-Pacific region. The group holds quarterly meetings and within its objectives there is a strong emphasis on sustainable development and the status of women as well as reproductive rights. The Pacific is the geographical focus area of NZPPD while Family Planning NZ provides secretariat support for NZPPD; resources for the Secretariat are provided in part from UNFPA.

The New Zealand Group of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (NZCWP) is part of the New Zealand branch of Commonwealth Parliamentarians Association (CPA). As with the NZPPD, NZCWP is a voluntary group of women parliamentarians from all parties. The group has co-chairs: one from the governing party and one from the opposition. Secretariat functions are provided by the parliament, specifically by the Parliamentary Relations and Education team in the Office of the Clerk. Funding for the Pacific Region Network, of which NZ is a member, is fund by the CPA. The main focus of the NZCWP continues to be the promotion of women's parliamentary representation of women, especially in the Pacific, and to represent women parliamentarians' views and concerns, as well as those of their constituents.<sup>33</sup>

Any parliamentarian who supports the aims and objectives of these groups may make a written application to the Secretariat for membership. Membership is usually

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<sup>33</sup> The NZCWP has its own rules which sets out its terms of reference and it is always co-chaired by a government and opposition member. The members set the agenda with co-chairs driving the strategic objectives- it is a non partisan space for women MPs, and they can invite women's groups to provide advice. The work of the NZCWP is relatively nascent and no independent web presence for reports exists as yet. However, inter-parliamentary activities of NZCWP are reported on and then tabled in parliament. and available via the parliament webiste (Interview with Parliamentary Services, April 2015).

granted on the approval of two-thirds of the members. However in practice membership recruitment is not this formal and to-date approving membership has not been an issue. In the case of the NZCWP, membership is restricted to women members of parliament. Membership is not open to the public, but NZPPD is outward looking, in part because its secretariat services are provided by a civil society organization and its funding is provided by an international NGO (the United Nations Population Fund). For example, the Secretariat may suggest a guest presentation from a community group if the topic aligns with the objectives of NZPPD. Open hearings are also an avenue used to bring MPs from the region together with academic experts, Pacific community service organizations, educators, researchers.

The membership of NZCWP is also limited to parliamentarians but is open to discussions with women's movement organizations when appropriate. Moreover, its goal of increasing women's representation in parliament necessarily requires it to engage with women's groups in discussions around strategies for the recruitment of women. In addition, the second objective of the NZCWP is intentionally broad (i.e. to represent women parliamentarians' views and concerns). Potentially, this allows women parliamentarians who are members to bring issues to meetings which may then become part of the NZCWP policy agenda.<sup>34</sup> Both cross-parliamentary groups have considerable autonomy in setting their substantive agenda. However, there is an expectation that all members of the group will agree to the set of issues to be pursued by the group. This precludes any claims being raised that may be subject to government policy or which may have budgetary implications.

## **Comparing the Belgian, NZ and UK cases**

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<sup>34</sup> One issue currently under consideration by the NZCWP is marriage law, and age of consent for NZ female residents who travel overseas for arranged marriages prior to the current NZ age of 18.

In the Tables below we compare the UK, Belgian NZ parliamentary bodies (APPGs, committees, groups and venues) concerned with women/gender. Features that positively contribute to the quality criterion that guide our analysis are indicated with a ‘+’; features that impact negatively are indicated with a ‘-’.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

In the New Zealand case, there are no dedicated women’s / gender standing committees, only women’s party groups and parliamentary ‘issue’ groups. Whether ordinary committees address gender depends on who sits on them. That said, the NZPPD is a more outward looking body. Although membership is still limited to parliamentarians, civil society can be invited in, and it receives external secretariat support. NZCWP membership is limited to parliamentarians and is not in close discussion with women’s movement organizations but it is looking to expand its reach and issues. Accordingly, we might suggest that these ‘issue’ groups offer potential for women in conservative parties who are liberal (feminist) in orientation to undertake work on women’s issues that are not part of their parties’ policy platform. However, quality representation through these venues appears contingent at best.

In the UK and NZ cases, all MPs, including those with links with women’s movements can join the women/gender bodies, on their own initiative. In Belgium, in contrast, membership is limited and parties decide on who becomes a member. This implies that MPs with links with women’s movements can be either included or excluded; the latter a possibility in the case of parties that resist gender equality reforms, which may in turn lower levels of responsiveness; or progressive parties may choose to. Moreover, all MPs may have to refrain from voicing women’s movement interests when they conflict with their

party line, irrespective of their links with women's organisations. In the UK and NZ such women/gender bodies are free from party whips. However, in the NZ case it is rare for issues to reach the agenda if the respective parties have an explicit position on that issue. Given that in the UK and NZ civil society organisations (that have connections with the women's movement) offer critical resource support to at least one of the women/gender bodies, linkage with the women's movement is more or less guaranteed, even if this relies on informal rather than formal associations/rules, and may be limited in the diversity of groups included. There is no such guarantee in the Belgian case. Women's movement representatives can be included through hearings, but there exists no obligation to hear from the women's movement. The only feature that seems to increase responsiveness in a stronger way in the Belgian case as compared to the UK and NZ ones, is that the agenda and the documents of the women/gender bodies in Belgium are easily accessible: women in civil society have access to information about when and how women's interests are represented. Moreover, the committee meetings are public. The low level of external communication in the UK and NZ cases is rather problematic in light of establishing *responsiveness*.

When we turn to the criterion of *inclusiveness* of a variety of views and interests, the Belgian and UK system seems more promising than the NZ one, with Belgium ranking above the UK. This is foremost the case because in the Belgian and UK parliaments the rules concerning the composition of the gender equality bodies are more strict when it comes to the inclusion of all elected parties, governing as well as oppositional ones. Because members self-select into the parliamentary groupings in NZ there is no guarantee that all parties are represented. The greater internal orientation of the women/gender bodies in the UK and NZ constitute a likely limitation for including extra-parliamentary voices, in that there is limited communication with groups outside parliament, as already noted. In Belgium women and women's movement organisations have the greater possibility –albeit

foremost hypothetical- to anticipate exclusion and for instance (threaten to) approach the press, parties or individual MPs. In all three cases the women/gender bodies can consult or invite in other/marginal voices –through outside membership (in Belgium), through secretariat support (UK) and hearings or presentations (in New Zealand) – but none of them provides guarantees or incentives to put this into practice.

## **Conclusions**

The UK and NZ women/gender bodies appear to constitute only a limited model for ‘good’ substantive representation of women. They are not currently required or designed to provide extensive inclusion from civil society; they lack the capacity to develop such links, unless they are well resourced by a civil society group which in turn would need to be committed to seek out wider civil society participation. They constitute then, more of an intra-institution forum, with some outside links. So they can – at best- create a space for women’s issues to be raised within the parliamentary arena, and to make some links with outside interests. But as more of a body ‘for women’ in both the UK and NZ parliaments, they fall short of an institutionalized conduit for, and deliberative forum of women’s interests from outside in. Where the women/gender bodies better fulfil these criteria, this is largely dependent upon the personal commitment and capacities of the Chair working with their Secretariat. To achieve ‘good’ SRW, a range of additional measures would be likely required in these two cases, not least: increased institutional capacity; a requirement for annual reporting of events; rules or terms of reference that facilitate more systematic inclusion of, or consultation with, civil society organisations, and better use of websites and public meetings.

The Belgian case looks in comparison more promising. The key positive features of the Belgian women’s/gender bodies are the ones that guarantee inclusiveness and equal



treatment of a variety of perspectives and views. Basically, these are a side-effect of the Belgian PR system: the fact that all parties need to be proportionally included in all layers of decision-making, including in the parliamentary bodies seems –at least theoretically- to provide the most promising conditions for good substantive representation of women, although the same cannot be said of the PR system in New Zealand. This partially supports contentions that PR may be positively associated with the DRW. That said, the level of formalization that comes along with the PR system in Belgium impacts negatively on the responsiveness of women's substantive representation in the women's/gender bodies. However, it appears to lead to lesser guarantees for linkage with women's movements in comparison with the UK case, which more is more grassroots in nature but wields less power. Stronger links with the women's movement and women in society would thus be key to enhanced SRW via Belgian women/gender parliamentary bodies. Here, the system of hearings seems to be a tool that can be re-designed and better operationalized.

Good substantive representation is no longer - if it ever was – about the presence of feminist representatives acting within legislatures. Conceived of as a process, women/gender parliamentary bodies can be considered to constitute one site and judged against our three criteria: responsiveness, inclusiveness, and equality and egalitarianism. Applying such criteria to our three cases – the UK Parliament, Belgium and New Zealand, we have found variation. Our analysis to date do not suggest a robust conclusion that the institutional arrangements underpinning any of these women/gender parliamentary bodies constitute a strong site for good SRW. Indeed, in all three parliaments *whether* the substantive representation occurs looks to remain very much dependant on the role of critical actors therein. This means that political parties and individual women parliamentarians may prove important to the content and operation of such site. Accordingly, and recognizing the preliminary nature of our empirical analysis, this paper

prompts both additional research and foregrounds the question of the further institutionalization of women/gender parliamentary committees as an appropriate strategy for good SRW.

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**Table 1** Comparing responsiveness

	<b>Belgium</b>	<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>
<b>Responsiveness</b> <i>'Are the claims included in the process of SRW responsive to women in society?'</i>	<p><u>Membership</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : committee membership reflects the ambitions of the MPs</li> <li>- : Membership is limited, possibly excluding feminists/MPs with ties to women's movement</li> <li>- : parties decide on membership</li> </ul> <p><u>Ideology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- : MPs follow party line</li> </ul> <p><u>Civil society links</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : possible through hearings/individual MPs</li> <li>- : no guarantees for such a link</li> </ul> <p><u>Activities' visibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : external communication (agenda and main documents online)</li> <li>+ : committee meetings are public</li> </ul>	<p><u>Membership</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : All MPs with links with women's movements can become a member</li> <li>+ : Membership on own initiative</li> <li>+: APPGs must have membership from 'all parties'</li> </ul> <p><u>Ideology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : APPG members are free of party whip</li> </ul> <p><u>Civil society links</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : where APPGs are supported by civil society groups providing secretariat resources</li> </ul> <p><u>Activities' visibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- : low external communication</li> </ul>	<p><u>Membership</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : All MPs can become a member</li> <li>+ : Membership on own initiative</li> <li>- : Are not required to have membership from 'all parties'</li> </ul> <p><u>Ideology</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : GS CPGs members free of party whip</li> <li>- : Agenda items restricted to policy issues on which all members can agree</li> </ul> <p><u>Civil society links</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ : through hearings/individual MPs</li> <li>- : no guarantees for such a link</li> <li>+ : where GS CPGs are supported by civil society groups providing secretariat resources</li> </ul> <p><u>Activities' visibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- : informal, not through parliamentary channels</li> </ul>

**Table 2** Comparing inclusiveness

	Belgium	United Kingdom	New Zealand
<b>Inclusiveness</b> <i>'Is the process of SRW inclusive of all/ a wide variety of claims?'</i>	<u>Membership</u> + : in theory and practice: all parties represented in proportion to the number of seats	<u>Membership</u> + : in theory: all MPs (male/female; party/non-party; outside members; both Houses) - : in practice: dominance of one party possible	<u>Membership</u> + : in theory all MPs (male/female; major/minor party) -: dominance of one party possible but unlikely to impact due to sharing of chair/deputy/co-chair roles
	<u>Civil Society links</u> + : possible and actively sought through hearings - : dominance of some civil society organisations possible particularly well-organized and stronger organizations	<u>Civil Society links</u> + : possible through outside members - : dominance of civil society organisations supporting the APPG (excluding others) high risk	<u>Civil Society links</u> + : possible through hearings, guest speakers, expert evidence - : dominance of some civil society organisations is theoretically possible
	<u>Activities</u> + : external communication: agenda and main documents online + : committee meetings are public	<u>Activities</u> - : low external communication	<u>Activities</u> + : external communication: agenda and main documents online + : press releases on major events - : committee meetings by invitation



